

# Arab Festival Highlights Kennedy Center's New Season

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The Arab world will be united. Artistic anniversaries will be duly feted. And "Ragtime" will be exhumed twice over, once as the musical and once as a Balanchine ballet. Those were the highlights from today's announcement of the Kennedy Center's 2008-09 season.

Next year, the center's annual package-tour festival takes on, rather than a single country, the 22 nations of the Arab League, from Egypt to Somalia. The three-week festival (Feb. 25-March 15) is called "Arabesque: Arts of the Arab World," and represents one of the center's most ambitious projects to date. It has a \$10 million budget (well over the approximately \$6 million for this year's Japan festival) and calls for construction of a souk on the Kennedy Center premises.

The program will bring in groups such as the Caracalla Dance Theater of Lebanon. There will be a play called "Alive from Palestine: Stories Under Occupation," and an evening of sacred music representing the broad range of religions actually present under the Arab umbrella.

The festival aspires to show "other sides of Arab people than people here are reading about in the newspaper," said Michael Kaiser, the Kennedy Center's president. "Art is a way of examining what their concerns are, what they're talking about."

The season will open with an all-American fanfare conceived to celebrate the 50th anniversary of Congress's official approval of a national cultural center -- the Kennedy Center's conception, so to speak. "Arts Across America" includes artists from every state of the union in a melange of events: performances of National Symphony Orchestra commissions from South Dakota, Tennessee, Kansas and Nevada (part of the NSO's American Residencies program); and the maiden concert of the "105 Voices of History National Choir," with one member from each of the 105 Historically Black Colleges and Universities across the nation.

Other celebrations include the 80th birthday of the composer and conductor Andr   Previn -- to be marked on Jan. 31 with an NSO concert conducted by Previn and including his Double Concerto for Violin and Double Bass. The 80th birthday of the jazz saxophonist Benny Golson will be marked on Jan. 24 with a range of performers including Al Jarreau and Bill Cosby.

"Ragtime," with music by Stephen Flaherty, directed by Marcia Milgrom Dodge, is the flagship production in a theater season presented largely under the heading "Broadway: The Third Generation," which purports to focus on younger writers of musicals like Flaherty. Many are the same people who were hailed in the late 1980s as "the next generation," not all of whom have quite fulfilled their promise. Michael John LaChiusa, another member of the "Third Generation," will write the music for a new musical of "Giant" at the Signature Theater, funded by the Kennedy Center Fund for New American Plays.

And a special "Three Generations" event will reopen the Eisenhower Theater from its 17-month sleep, with excerpts from the Gershwins' "Girl Crazy," Bock and Harnick's "Fiddler on the Roof" and "Side Show" by Henry Krieger and Bill Russell.

The other "Ragtime," Balanchine's, comes courtesy of the Suzanne Farrell Ballet, which in October will take over the reopened Eisenhower with seven performances including a reconstruction of this lost work and an ambitious essay at the "Liebeslieder Walzer."

Classic dance fares well in the coming season -- "classic" indicating a tendency toward the tried and true on both the ballet and modern sides of the program. "Modern" is clearly used in the sense of "20th-century," since most of the modern companies represent Grand Old Men and Women: Martha Graham, Alvin Ailey, Merce Cunningham, Paul Taylor. Most notable is the return of Mark Morris to the Kennedy Center after more than a decade's absence with "Mozart Dances," performed with a live orchestra.

On the ballet side, the San Francisco Ballet comes in with new works commissioned for its own 75th anniversary. Also notable is the first appearance of the Bolshoi under its new director, Yuri Burlaka, in what is, Kaiser said, to be a yearly arrangement with the Kennedy Center. It joins the Kirov, American Ballet Theater, the New York City Ballet, and the Royal Ballet. At the NSO, the departure of Leonard Slatkin as music director and the provisional nature of the current arrangement with Ivan Fischer, who as principal conductor will lead only five weeks of subscription concerts, leaves plenty of room for experimentation as the orchestra seeks its next music director. Christoph Eschenbach is not, so far, on the program, but notable conductors range from veterans such as David Zinman and the underrated Herbert Blomstedt, making his first NSO appearance since 1989 with Bruckner's 9th, to debutantes with the orchestra such as Michael Christie, Philippe Jordan, and Xian Zhang.